

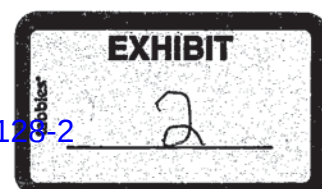
chapter 8

Documentary Films

Representing the Real

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Alex Gibney's 2016 film *Zero Days* is a stunning example of the many critical and provocative topics and strategies available to documentary cinema. Since John Grierson first described documentaries in 1926 as "the creative treatment of actuality," this particular film practice has continually explored those different actualities and realities in new and imaginative ways. In *The actuality of Zero Days*, that actuality focuses on Stuxnet, a self-perpetuating computer malwar worm developed by the Israel, the U.K., and the U.S. and used to attack the Iranian nuclear centrifuges and disappear without a source. Part suspense thriller, part espionage plot, and part political exposé, the film creates a montage of political and scientific talking heads, elaborate computer graphics, and reenactments that make this documentary appear almost to be a science-fiction film, exploring the new global terrain where the wars of the twenty-first century will be fought.



Werner Herzog's 2005 film *Grizzly Man* is a remarkable example of the many creative and unexpected topics and strategies available to a documentary film. Since John Grierson first described documentary cinema in 1926 as "the creative treatment of actuality," this particular film practice has continually explored those different actualities and realities in new and imaginative ways. The subject of Herzog's film, for instance, is Timothy Treadwell, a young man intent on protecting grizzly bears in the wilds of Alaska. Herzog does not directly explore Treadwell's mission and person, however, but primarily looks at him through video footage left by him after his gruesome death when attacked by a rogue bear. As Herzog presents and interacts with that footage (as well as with interviews with Treadwell's friends and acquaintances), reality for Treadwell becomes as much a performance as a fact. The film then gradually expands to become much more than a nature film and to develop as a profound and philosophical documentary about human psychology, the brutality of nature, and how we struggle to bridge the difference between the two. In *Grizzly Man* as in many other documentary films but with a strangely personal focus, reality is not simply depicted but rather questioned and debated.^[101]

For most of us, the film experience is primarily about elements like suspense, humor, or intense emotions. Yet that experience can also include the desire to be better informed about a person or an event, to engage with new and challenging ideas, or to learn more about what happens in other parts of the world. A movie that aims to inform viewers about truths or facts is commonly referred to as a **documentary** film. John Grierson first used the term to describe a Robert Flaherty picture called *Moana* (1926) and its "visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family." Broadly speaking, a documentary film is a visual and auditory representation of the presumed facts, real experiences, and actual events of the

world. Documentary films usually employ and emphasize strategies and organizations that differ from those that define narrative cinema, such as plot and narration. Later Flaherty would team up with German filmmaker F. W. Murnau to integrate the documentary world of *Moana* into the narrative film *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (1931) [Figure 7.1], and this hybrid film raises key questions: How are documentary films different from narrative ones? What attracts us to them? How do they organize their material? What makes them popular, useful, and uniquely illuminating?

7.1 *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (1931). Following the documentary breakthrough of Flaherty's earlier *Moana*, Robert Flaherty and F. W. Murnau's new project combines a tragic love story with documentary images of Polynesian life. Courtesy Everett Collection

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Recognize that documentary films are best distinguished as cultural practices.
- Describe how documentary films employ nonfictional and non-narrative images and forms.
- Identify how documentary movies make and draw on specific historical heritages.
- Explain the common formal strategies and organizations used in documentary films.
- Summarize how documentary films have become associated with cultural values and traditions from which we develop filmic meaning.

If narrative films are prominently about memory and the shaping of time, then documentary movies are about insight and learning — expanding what we can know, feel, and see. Certainly narratives can enlarge and intensify the world for us in these ways as well, but without the primary task of telling a story, documentary movies — whether they are newsreels, theatrical films, PBS broadcasts, or specials on cable or streaming services — can

concentrate on leading our intellectual activities down new paths. Entertainment and artistry are of course not excluded from documentary films. In *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012), two South Africans take their cameras and iPhones on a search for a Detroit pop singer from the 1960s and 1970s, Rodriguez — who, unbeknownst to him, had achieved cult status in Africa. While Rodriguez is presumed dead by many and now struggling simply to make a living with construction jobs, this investigative quest discovers a lost hero and returns him to another world that celebrates him and his music in ways he had never experienced or imagined. Like the filmmakers and Rodriguez himself, we too discover new human depths and new cultural geographies across the world [Figure 7.2].

7.2 *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012). Entertainment and artistry intermingle in this quest for a lost reality that binds two cultures.

While narrative films are at the heart of commercial entertainment, documentary movies operate according to an “economics of information” since they usually rely on different sources of funding and different venues for exhibition through which to deliver their ideas and information. Many of the first films made in the 1890s and early 1900s, such as the traveling exhibitions and shows of Lyman H. Howe in America and Walter Haggart in England, were part of lectures, scientific presentations, or visual illustrations of the art of motion. Churches, schools, and cultural institutions supported and financially subsidized these presentations, usually in the name of intellectual, spiritual, or cultural development. Since then, documentaries have remained, to some extent, tied to and often financially dependent on private and public sponsorship, such as museums, government agencies, local social activists, and cultural foundations — from projects of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) that funded U.S. documentaries in the 1930s to the grants of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) that support some nonfiction films today. In

addition, many documentaries are made for television, a phenomenon that has increased since the 1980s, when the deregulation of the broadcast industry encouraged the proliferation of such cable networks as Discovery Channel and History. For these channels, documentary programming has become a mainstay.

Although documentary films often claim and sometimes deserve the title “independent films,” their survival has depended on a public culture that promotes learning as a crucial part of the film experience. Outside of or on the fringes of commercial cinema, this “other” culture of films has endured and often triumphed through every period of film history and in virtually every world culture. In the following sections, we will explore the many ways these films have expanded how we observe, listen, and think.

A Short History of Documentary Cinema

From ancient government records to family home movies, charts mapping new territories to school textbooks, we explain and learn about the world in ways that stories cannot fully explore. For example, the journals describing Marco Polo’s travels through China or the early-nineteenth-century treatise by Sir Humphry Davy on the discovery of electricity have, in their own ways, recorded lost worlds, offered new ideas, or changed how we see society.

~~VIEWING CUE~~

~~What historical precedents (scientific treatises, essays, news reports) might explain the strategies used in the film you’ve just viewed?~~

At the end of the nineteenth century, the search for empirical and spiritual truths produced new educational practices, technological tools, colonial expeditions, and secret societies — these were the vehicles to new experiences, pragmatic thought, and better worlds. In the

midst of these trends, film was introduced in 1895 and used to illustrate lectures, offer cinematic portraits of famous people, and guide audiences through short movie travelogues. For many, film was not an art but a tool for investigating and explaining the physical and social worlds. The Edison Company stunned viewers in 1901 with a series of short films documenting the activities of President William McKinley on the day of his assassination, his funeral, and the transition of power to President Theodore Roosevelt [Figure 7.3]. Just as narrative films are rooted in cultural foundations and histories that preceded the cinema by centuries, so too are documentary films.

A Prehistory of Documentaries

For centuries, documentary cinema was anticipated by oral practices such as sermons, political speeches, and academic lectures; visual practices such as maps, photographs, and paintings; musical practices such as folk songs and symphonies; and written practices such as letters, diaries, poems, scientific treatises, and newspaper reports. The essay form, in particular, is considered to have had a great influence on documentary cinema. Spearheaded by Michel de Montaigne, the essay form first appeared in the late sixteenth century and centered around personal and everyday subjects as a fragmented commentary on life and ideas.

7.3 *President McKinley's Funeral Cortege at Buffalo, New York* (1901). Compelling images of events surrounding President William McKinley's assassination were recorded by motion-picture cameras. The Library of Congress has made these films available through the online American Memory Project. Library of Congress

Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, journalism developed as a public forum for expressing ideas, announcing events, and recording daily happenings around town.

Around 1800, Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Malthus wrote books, pamphlets, and lengthy essays describing the current state of society and insisting on practical ways that social science could improve people's lives. As the middle class moved to the center of Western societies in the nineteenth century, people demanded more information about the world.

Photography and photojournalism, evolving from new printing and lithographic technologies, became widespread and popular ways to record and comment on events. Unlike narrative practices, such as realistic novels or short stories, photojournalism presented virtually instantaneous and seemingly uncontestable records, factual representations of people and events frozen in time. One of the most dramatic combinations of social science and photography is Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) [Figure 7.4], which is part lecture, part photo essay; its pseudoscientific sermon exposes and condemns living conditions in New York City's tenement housing.

7.4 “Bandit’s Roost,” *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). Jacob Riis documents the squalor and danger of tenement life in nineteenth-century New York. Jacob August Riis/CorbisNA

1895–1905: Early Actualities, Scenics, and Topicals

The very first movies appeared in 1895 and were frequently called **actualities** — that is, moving nonfiction snapshots of real people and events, with the most famous being Louis and Auguste Lumière's *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*. This film captivated audiences with its recording and presentation of a simple everyday activity without explanation or story line. **Scenics**, a variation of these early nonfiction films, offered exotic or remarkable images of nature or foreign lands. In Birt Acres's *Rough Sea at Dover* (1896), an immobile image shows waves crashing against a seawall, while other short scenics present

views of Jerusalem or Niagara Falls. When these films captured or sometimes re-created historical or newsworthy events, they would be referred to as **topicals**, suggesting the kind of cultural, historical, or political relevance usually found in newspapers. Around 1898, for example, the ongoing Spanish-American War figured in a number of topicals, often with battle scenes depicting the sinking of the American ship *Maine*, which was re-created through miniatures. These factual and fabricated images of the war attracted large audiences [Figure 7.5].

7.5 The Motion Picture Camera Goes to War (1898). Many topicals produced between 1898 and 1901 depicted the ongoing Spanish-American War. Archival film and/or video materials from the collections of the Library of Congress

The 1920s: Robert Flaherty and the Soviet Documentaries

Footage of distant lands continued to interest moviemakers and audiences even after narrative film became the norm around 1910. American adventurers Martin and Osa Johnson documented their travels in Africa and the South Seas in such popular films as *Jungle Adventures* (1921) and *Simba* (1928) [Figure 7.6]. But it was Robert Flaherty, often referred to as “the father of documentary cinema,” who significantly expanded the powers and popularity of nonfiction film in the 1920s, most famously with his early works *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana*. Blending a romantic fascination with nature and an anthropological desire to document and record other civilizations, Flaherty identified new possibilities for funding these noncommercial films (largely through corporations) and, with the success of *Nanook*, identified new audiences interested in realistic films that were exciting even without stories and stars.

At the same time, a very different kind of documentary was taking shape in Soviet cinema. Filmmakers such as Dziga Vertov and Esfir Shub saw timely political potential in

creating documentary films with strong ideological messages conveyed through the formal technique of montage. In *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927), Shub compiles and edits existing footage to show the historical conflicts between the aristocracy and the workers. In *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), which would become one of the most renowned “city symphony” documentaries, Vertov re-creates and celebrates the energy of the everyday people and the activities of a modern city.

7.6 *Simba* (1928). Early documentaries took the shape of explorations of new lands and cultures, frequently transforming those worlds into strange and exotic objects. Here American adventurers Martin and Osa Johnson documented their travels in Africa and the South Seas. Courtesy of Milestone Film and Video

1930–1945: The Politics and Propaganda of Documentary

Perhaps more so than for other film practices, the introduction of **optical sound recording** in 1927 catapulted documentary films forward, as it made possible the addition of educational or social commentary to accompany images in newsreels, documentaries, and propaganda films. Public institutions such as the General Post Office in England, President Roosevelt’s Resettlement Administration, and the National Film Board of Canada, as well as private groups such as New York City’s Film and Photo League, unhesitatingly supported documentary practices in the 1930s and 1940s. These institutions prefigure the more contemporary supporters of documentary film, including the American Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), and the German ZDF television station.

Indeed, documentary film history can never really be divorced from these critical sources of funding and distribution. Perhaps the most prominent figure to forge and develop a

relationship between documentary filmmakers and those institutions that would eventually fund them was British filmmaker John Grierson. From the late 1920s through the 1940s, as the first head of the National Film Board of Canada, Grierson not only promoted documentaries that dealt with social issues but also established the institutional foundations that for years funded and distributed them. Government and institutional support for documentary cinema would proceed in a more troubling direction in the 1930s and 1940s in the form of **propaganda films** [Figures 7.7a and 7.7b] — two famous examples being Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), commemorating the sixth Nazi rally in Nuremberg, and *Japanese Relocation* (1943), a U.S. film justifying the internment of Japanese Americans on the West Coast.

1950s–1970s: New Technologies and the Arrival of Television

In the 1950s, changes in documentary practices followed the technological development of lightweight 16mm cameras, which allowed filmmakers a new kind of spontaneity and inventiveness when capturing reality. Most dramatic was the **cinéma vérité** movement that appeared in France at this time, whereby a “cinema truth” was achieved through the use of lightweight cameras to record daily life and public events. Documentary filmmakers like Jean Rouch, with films like *Moi un noir (I, a Black)* (1958), could now participate more directly and provocatively in the reality they filmed. This new mobile and independent method of documentary filmmaking advanced again with the development of portable magnetic sync-sound recorders in the late 1950s, and then again in 1968 with the introduction of Portapak video equipment. Armed with a lightweight camera and the ability to record direct sound, filmmakers could now document actions and events that previously remained hidden or at a distance. Rouch's later film, *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961), has become a classic example of these new cinéma vérité possibilities, as it features random encounters with people on the

streets of Paris, answering questions and giving their opinions on happiness, war, politics, love, and work.

7.7 (a) *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and (b) *Japanese Relocation* (1943). Films like these represented the disturbing propagandistic power of documentaries controlled and supported by governments and other institutional agents. 7.7a: Courtesy Photofest

(a)

(b)

Sometimes referred to as the golden age of television documentary, this period also brought a rapid expansion of documentaries aimed at a new television audience. Merging older documentary traditions with television news reportage, these programs were often noted for their tough honesty and social commitment. The work of television journalist Edward R. Murrow, who battled over Senator Joseph McCarthy's indiscriminate attacks on individuals, set a new benchmark for news reporting.

Perhaps the best-known example of the convergence of new technology, a more mobile style, and television reportage is Robert Drew's *Primary*, the 1960 film about the Democratic primary in Wisconsin between John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey [Figure 7.8]. This documentary was produced for the series *ABC Close-Up!* (1960–1961) by Drew Associates, the organization that would train many of the documentary filmmakers associated with **direct cinema**, the American documentary version of *cinéma vérité* that aims to capture unfolding events as unobtrusively as possible.

7.8 *Primary* (1960). This documentary about John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign took advantage of the mobility and immediacy produced by new camera and sound equipment.

1980s–Present: Digital Cinema, Cable, and Reality TV

In the 1980s, the consumer video camera was taken up by artists and activists, such as the AIDS **activist video** collective Testing the Limits, as part of the democratization of documentary that would continue with the rapid shift to digital formats. With the introduction in the late 1980s of Avid's nonlinear digital editing process making editing so much easier and less expensive, documentary **shooting ratio** — the ratio of footage shot to footage used in the film — increased exponentially. This led to the growth of personal documentaries, which would eventually achieve theatrical exposure in such films as Morgan Spurlock's quirky tale of his fast-food consumption quest, *Super Size Me* (2004) [Figure 7.9]. During this period, changes in the distribution and exhibition of documentaries significantly impacted the availability and popularity of these films.

7.9 *Super Size Me* (2004). Morgan Spurlock at a checkup in this personal documentary on fast-food diets and their effects on American obesity.

In addition to increased festival and theatrical exposure and the expanding video rental market, cable and satellite television networks provide more and more opportunities for documentary projects. Under Sheila Nevins, HBO's documentary division has sponsored numerous powerful and acclaimed films, including *Born into Brothels* (2004) and *If God Is Willing and da Creek Don't Rise* (2010). *Planet Earth* (2006), the eleven-part nature TV series co-produced by the BBC and Discovery Channel, garnered awards, critical praise, and wide audiences for its state-of-the-art, high-definition cinematography and conservation message, echoed in a successful series of theatrically released documentaries from the DisneyNature label [Figure 7.10]. While public television and cable networks provide more venues for independently produced documentaries that may otherwise have limited distribution, the relatively low production costs of nonfiction programming have also encouraged many channels to fill their schedules with reality television. From *Pawn Stars* to

Top Chef, these formats feature real people in situations that blur the lines between actual events, theatrical performances, and reenactments [Figures 7.11a and 7.11b].

7.10 *Chimpanzee* (2012). Though relatively few documentaries receive wide national releases, Disney has seen success in recent years with their series of nature films. Their *Chimpanzee* remains one of the highest-grossing documentaries of recent years.

7.11 (a) *Pawn Stars* (2009–) and (b) *Top Chef* (2006–). Just two examples of reality television shows that blur the boundaries between what is real and what is performed [HJ2].

7.11a: © History Channel/Courtesy Everett Collection/7.11b: David Moir/© Bravo/Courtesy Everett Collection

(a)

(b)

The Elements of Documentary Films

The documentary film, despite sharing elements of cinematic form with narrative and experimental films, organizes its material, constitutes its authority, and engages the audience in a distinct fashion. The following section outlines the modes of discourse, organizational patterns, and methods of presenting a point of view typical of the documentary film.

Nonfiction and Non-Narrative

Nonfiction and non-narrative, cornerstones of documentary films, are two key concepts that are often debated. Although documentary films and experimental films (see Chapter 8) can both be described as non-narrative, nonfiction has primarily been associated with documentary films. **Nonfiction films** present (presumed) factual descriptions of actual

events, persons, or places, rather than their fictional or invented re-creation. Attempts to make a hard-and-fast distinction between “factual descriptions” and “fictional re-creations” have provoked heated debates throughout film history, since facts are arguably malleable. Nonetheless, a fundamental distinction can be made between, say, a PBS documentary about the life of Queen Elizabeth II of England and Stephen Frears’s feature film *The Queen* (2006). The first film uses the accounts of journalists, news media, and historians to show the facts and complex issues in the life of one of the great women of history. The second film uses some of the same information but focuses specifically on events immediately following the death of Princess Diana and the queen’s relationship with Prime Minister Tony Blair in order to create a dramatic and entertaining episode in her life.

However, it is also important to recognize that nonfiction can be used in a variety of creative ways. In *Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief* (2015), Alex Gibney pursues a nonfictional, behind-the-scenes investigation of the cause behind the corporation’s collapse through interviews with the actual participants in and victims of the event the scientology movement as it attract, manipulates, and often threatens individuals ranging from movie stars to IRS agents [Figure 7.12]. In contrast, in *Of Great Events and Ordinary People* (1979), Raoul Ruiz turns an assignment to conduct nonfictional interviews in a Paris neighborhood into a complex and humorous reflection on the impossibility of revealing any truth or honesty through the interview process.

7.12 *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005). Alex Gibney’s film is a nonfiction investigation of the corruption that led to the collapse of a powerful American corporation.

Non-narrative films eschew or de-emphasize stories and narratives, instead employing other forms like lists, repetition, or contrasts as their organizational structure. For example, a

non-narrative film might create a visual list (of objects found in an old house, for instance), repeat a single image as an organizing pattern (returning to an ancient carving on the front door of the house), or alternate between objects in a way that suggests fundamental differences (contrasting the rooms, clothing, and tools used by the men and the women in the house).

A non-narrative movie may certainly embed stories within its organization, but those stories usually become secondary to the non-narrative pattern. In *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983), slow-motion and time-lapse photography capture the open vistas of an American landscape and their destruction against the drifting tones of Philip Glass's music: pristine fields and mountains, rusty towns, and garbage-strewn highways [Figure 7.13]. Through these images, one may detect traces of a story about the collapse of America in what the Hopi Indian title declares is "a life out of balance," but that simple and vague narrative is not nearly as powerful as the emotional force of the film's accumulating visual repetitions and contrasts. Diane Keaton's *Heaven* (1987) intersperses clips from old movies with angels and other images of heaven and presents a litany of faces and voices to answer such questions as "Does heaven exist?" and "Is there sex in heaven?" Although we may sense a religious mystery tale behind these questions and answers, this movie is better understood as a playful list of unpredictable reactions to the possibility of a life hereafter.

7.13 *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983). A non-narrative catalog of images contrasting America's beauty and decay.

Nonfiction and non-narrative clearly suggest distinctive ways of seeing the world. Although they often overlap in documentary films, one form of presentation does not necessarily imply the other. A non-narrative film may be entirely or partly fictional; conversely, a nonfiction film can be constructed as a narrative. Complicating these

distinctions is the fact that both kinds of practices can become less a function of the intentions of the film than of viewers' perception; what may seem nonfictional or non-narrative in one context may not seem so in another. For example, audiences in the 1920s mostly assumed that *Nanook of the North* was a nonfictional account of an Inuit tribesman and his family. Now, most viewers recognize that some of the central events and actions were fabricated for the documentary. Similarly, for some viewers, *The Cove* (2009) is a non-narrative exposé of the capture and slaughter of dolphins by a Japanese company, while for others it is a dramatic narrative about a group of activists on a rescue mission. Keeping in mind how the different meanings of nonfiction and non-narrative can historically and perceptually shift should, however, only make the categories more useful in judging the strategies of a particular documentary as part of changing cultural contexts and as a reflection of an audience's point of view.

VIEWING CUE

Is the film you have just seen in class best described as nonfiction or non-narrative? What elements helped you decide which categorization was more appropriate?

Expositions: Organizations That Show or Describe

While narrative film relies on specific patterns to shape the material realities of life into imaginative histories, the documentary employs strategies and forms that resemble scientific and educational methods. For example, the 2015 feature film *The Walk* is a narrative about Philippe Petit, a French tightrope walker who in 1974 tiptoed between the tops of the two World Trade Center buildings on a thin wire; replete with chronological suspense, intrigue, special effects, and even romance, this narrative moves crisply forward to culminate in a heroic conclusion, cheered on by the New Yorkers who watch the walk. The 1974-2008

documentary *Man on Wire*, conversely, develops in a nonlinear fashion, presents actual footage of the walk, has Petit himself explain much of his planning, interjects commentary by other participants in the event, and inserts home-movies of his training.

For example, a narrative film of a young Thai girl longing to leave an isolated island might describe her adventurous escape to Bangkok. A documentary film, in contrast, might examine the details of her daily chores and intersperse those details with interviews in which she explains her frustrations and describes her hopes and wishes for another life. These different strategies alter our experience of the girl, thus making the character seem like two different people.^[114]

The formal expositional strategies used in documentary movies are known as “documentary organizations.” These organizations show or describe experiences in a way that differs from narrative films — that is, without the temporal logic of narrative and without the presiding focus on how a central character motivates and moves events forward. Traditional documentaries tend to observe the facts of life from a distance and organize their observations as objectively as possible to suggest some definition of the subject through the exposition itself.

Here we will discuss three distinctive organizations of documentary films: the cumulative, the contrastive, and the developmental. These organizations may appear in different films or may be used in some combination in the same film. Then we will explore how the use of these organizational patterns is often governed by the perspective — or rhetorical position — from which a film’s observations are made.

Cumulative Organizations

Cumulative organizations present a catalog of images or sounds throughout the course of the film. It may be a simple series with no recognizable logic connecting the images. Joris

Ivens's *Rain* (1929) presents images from a rainstorm in Amsterdam, showing the rain falling in a multitude of different ways and from many different angles [Figure 7.14]. We do not sense that we are watching this downpour from beginning to end; rather, we see this rain as the accumulation of its seemingly infinite variety of shapes, movements, and textures.

Another example of cumulative organization is *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1993). Although some viewers may expect a biography of the renowned pianist Gould, the film intentionally fragments his life into numerical episodes focused on his playing, on his acquaintances discussing him, and on reenactments of moments in his life [Figure 7.16].

7.14 *Rain* (1929). The accumulation of images of different kinds of rain showers gradually creates a poetic documentary of various shapes and textures.

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FILM IN FOCUS

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Nonfiction and Non-Narrative in

Man of Aran (1934)

See also: *Nanook of the North* (1922); *Sunless* (1982); *Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner* (2001)

FILM IN FOCUS



bedfordstmartins.com/filmexperience

To watch a video about *Man of Aran*, see the *Film Experience* LaunchPad.

Robert Flaherty's documentary film *Man of Aran* (1934) is an early, incisive example of how films employ, albeit in different ways, both nonfictional and non-narrative practices. *Man of Aran*, a documentary about a small community living on an island off the coast of western Ireland, does not identify the characters or explain their motivations; instead, it lists and describes the activities that make up their daily lives and records the hardships of living on a barren, isolated island. The members of this seemingly primitive community cart soil to grow potatoes on their rocky plots and struggle against the ferocious sea to fish and survive. In an important sense, the film is a historical and cultural record: it documents the routines of the residents' existence without the drama of a narrative beginning, climax, or conclusion. Adding to the distant atmosphere of a place that seems newly discovered by this film, the characters are not named, and the force of the sea constantly overwhelms their meager attempts to create order and meaning in their lives [Figure 7.15]. Well beyond learning about the customs of a distant way of life, audiences find in *Man of Aran* a dignity of living far removed from common experience and knowledge.

Stories and narratives are not the primary organizational feature in *Man of Aran*. Instead, the film mostly accumulates, repeats, and contrasts images. The brutal lifestyle on the island is presented by contrasting human activities with natural forces: images of people preparing meals, planting a garden, and repairing fishing nets alternate with images of crashing waves, barren rock coasts, and empty horizons.

Yet traces of fiction and narrative are still visible in the film, even if they are subsumed under alternative organizational patterns. Some situations are in fact fabricated, such as the episode in which the men are nearly lost at sea in the hunt for a basking shark. Shark hunts were a part of life two generations earlier but by 1934 no longer took place on the Aran Islands. The episode thus relies on the dramatic suspense that drives any good adventure story.

7.15 *Man of Aran* (1934). Inhabiting Irish islands unknown to many viewers, nameless individuals fight for survival against the barren and harsh world.

However innovative and distinctive this film is, it also reminds us of its cultural heritage. While explicitly working out of the tradition of an anthropological report, *Man of Aran* also adapts the tradition of the travel essay or travelogue, found in the works of writers from Henry James (1843–1916) to Bruce Chatwin (1940–1989). Whereas James describes the sights and sounds of his visits to Venice and Chatwin his encounters in Patagonia, Flaherty's film shows us a culture on the far reaches of the emerging modern civilizations of the twentieth century.

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Contrastive Organizations

A variation on cumulative organization, contrastive organizations present a series of contrasts or oppositions meant to indicate the different points of view on its subject. Thus a film may alternate between images of war and peace or between contrasting skylines of different cities. Sometimes these contrasts may be evaluative, distinguishing positive and negative events. At other times, contrastive exposition may suggest a more complicated relationship between objects or individuals. Among the most ambitious versions of this technique is a group of

films by Michael Apted, beginning with his documentary *7 Up* (1963) and followed by successive films made every seven years; the films track the changing attitudes and social situations of a group of children as they grow into the adults of *49 Up* (2005) and *56 Up* (2012). With a new film appearing every seven years, these films contrast not only the differences among developing individuals in terms of class, gender, and family life but also the differences in their changing outlooks as they grow older.^[115] Note how this emphasis on the ~~contrastive shape~~ contrasting shapes of these developments differs significantly from the fiction film *Boyhood* (2014), where the use of the same actor as he matures over 10 years, a decade emphasizes the coherence of the development.

7.16 *Thirty-Two Short Films About Glenn Gould* (1993). As an expository organization, the film offers a glimpse into the life of the notoriously elusive genius through snippets of performance footage intermixed with reenactments of moments in his life. The Kobal Collection/Art Resource, NY

7.17 *Night Mail* (1936). Within the journey of mail from London to Scotland, a poetry of the everyday develops and progresses, as the film follows the tasks of sorting mail, picking up that mail by trains, and eventually delivering it at the end of the line. Courtesy British Postal Museum & Archive

VIEWING CUE



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Examine carefully the organization of this clip from *The Cove* (2009). Does it follow a clear formal strategy? Explain.

Developmental Organizations

With developmental organizations, places, objects, individuals, or experiences are presented through a pattern that has a non-narrative logic or structure but still follows a logic of change or progression. For example, an individual may be presented as growing from small to large, as changing from a passive to an active personality, or as moving from the physical to the spiritual. With a script by W. H. Auden, *Night Mail* (1936) describes the journey of the mail train from London to Scotland, documenting and celebrating the many precisely coordinated tasks that make up this nightly civil service. With music from composer Benjamin Britten and poetry by Auden, the movement of this journey re-creates the rhythms of the train wheels as they accelerate, steady, and then slow in their developing path across England [Figure 7.17]. More recently, the 2007 *The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters* follows gamer Steve Wiebe in his attempt to break the record score of Donkey Kong champion Billy Mitchell. The film documents his progressive movement toward that goal and the showdown that threatens to derail it [Figure 7.18].

Rhetorical Positions

Just as narrative cinema uses different types of narrators and narration to tell stories from a certain angle, documentary and experimental films employ their own rhetorical positions, or organizational points of view, that shape their formal practices according to certain perspectives and attitudes. Sometimes these films might assume the neutral stance of the uninvolved observer — referred to as the “voice of God” because of its assumed authority and objectivity. At other times, the point of view of the documentary assumes a more limited or even personal perspective. Whether clearly visible and heard, omniscient or personal, or merely implied by the film’s organization, the rhetorical positions of documentary films generally articulate their attitudes and positions according to four principal frameworks:

- The first is associated with the effort to explore the world and its peoples.

- The second aims to interrogate or analyze an event or a problem.
- The third assumes the stance of a debater or polemicist who attempts to persuade the audience of a certain truth or point of view.
- The fourth foregrounds and reflects the presence and activity of the filmmaking process and/or the filmmaker.

7.18 *The King of Kong: A Fistful of Quarters* (2007). Gaming becomes a world of ever-rising scores, new records, and conquests, as we follow Steve Wiebe's journey from playing Donkey Kong in his garage to the Funspot Arcade in Laconia, New Hampshire, where he performs a live high score to prove his ability and legitimacy.

Sometimes these frameworks will overlap in a single film. For example, the voice of Peter Davis's *Hearts and Minds* (1974) is both explorative and polemical as it tears apart, with strategically placed interviews and newsreel footage, the myths supporting the Vietnam War [Figure 7.19]. *Winged Migration* (2001) uses both very little commentary and a "bird's-eye view" to present the flights of migratory birds around the world, while at the same time it subtly promotes the natural mysteries of those activities. *Capitalism: A Love Story* Where to Invade Next (2009/2015), a film that centers on director Michael Moore's perspective on the recent financial crisis and the ensuing bailout how other countries compare to the United States, offers an often exaggerated performance as a clearly argumentative perspective meant to incite and arouse audiences and to sway opinion on the current economic situation in the United States social and economic programs.

7.19 *Hearts and Minds* (1974). A documentary explores the realities of the Vietnam War, while trying to convince its audience of the misguided decisions that led to the disaster it became.

Explorative Positions

Explorative positions announce or suggest that the film's driving perspective is a scientific search into particular social, psychological, or physical phenomena. Informed by this position, a documentary assumes the perspective of a traveler, an explorer, or an investigator who encounters new worlds, facts, or experiences and aims to present and describe these straightforwardly, often as a witness. Travel films have existed since the first days of cinema when filmmakers would offer short records of exotic locations such as Niagara Falls or the Great Wall of China. The first feature-length documentaries extended that explorative curiosity, positioning the travel film somewhere between the anthropologist's urge to show different civilizations and peoples, as in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* [Figure 7.20], and the tourist's pleasure of visiting novel sites and locations, as in Jean Vigo's tongue-in-cheek wanderings through a French resort town in *Apropos of Nice* (1930). More recently, Werner Herzog's *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) mobilizes 3-D technology to explore the Chavet Cave drawings in Southern France, offering a stunning commentary on these prehistorical paintings and their anticipation of cinematic movement [Figure 7.21].

7.20 *Nanook of the North* (1922). Many documentaries mimic the anthropologist's project of exploring other cultures, in this case the rituals and daily routines of an Inuit family.

7.21 *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010). 3-D images allow Herzog to explore the space of prehistorical drawings in ways never before possible.

Interrogative Positions

Interrogative or analytical positions rhetorically structure a movie in a way that identifies the subject as being under investigation — either through an implicit or explicit question-and-answer format or by other, more subtle, techniques. Commonly condensed in the interview

format found in many documentary films, interrogative techniques can also employ a voiceover or an on-camera voice that asks questions of individuals or objects that may or may not respond to the questioning. Frank Capra's *Why We Fight* series (1943–1945) explicitly formulates itself as an inquisition into the motivations for the U.S. involvement in World War II, while in Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989) a question or problem may only be implied, and succeeding images may either resolve the problem or not. Errol Morris's *Fog of War* (2003) creates a visually and musically complex forum, filmed with an innovative camera device he called the "Interrotron," through which he elicits strained explanations from former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara about the catastrophe of the Vietnam War. One of the most profound and subtlest examples of the interrogative or analytical form is Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog* (1955), which offers images without answers [Figures 7.22a and 7.22b]. In short, interrogative and analytical forms may lead to more knowledge, or may simply raise more questions than they answer.

Persuasive Positions

Use of interrogation and analysis in a documentary film are often (but not always) intended to convince or persuade a viewer about certain facts or truths. Persuasive positions articulate a perspective that expresses a personal or social position using emotions or beliefs and aim to persuade viewers to feel and see in a certain way. Some films do so through voices and interviews that attempt to convince viewers of a particular cause. In *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), former vice president Al Gore positions himself like a professor before charts, graphs, and images in a sustained argument about the dangers of global warming [Figure 7.23]. Other movies may downplay the presence of the personal perspective and instead use images and sounds to influence viewers through argument or emotional appeal, as in propagandistic movies that urge certain political or social views. Leni Riefenstahl's infamous *Triumph of the*

Will allows the grandiose composition of images to convince viewers of the glorious powers of the Nazi Party; meanwhile, *Pussy Riot: A Punk Prayer* (2013) describes the dramatic protests of three young Russian women about the repressions in Russian society and their subsequent sentence of three years in prison. Between the pounding and energetic rhythms of the music and the absurdities of the trial, there is little question about its persuasive exposure of the Russian church and government.

7.22a and 7.22b *Night and Fog* (1955). As images of liberated survivors of the Nazi concentration camps alternate with contemporary images of the same empty camps, the complex organizational refrain of the film becomes, “Who is responsible?”

(a)

(b)

7.23 *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). Graphs, charts, and expert opinion help to persuade an audience of the dangers of global warming.

VIEWING CUE

Watch this clip from *He Named Me Malala* (2015). Describe the presiding voice or attitude with as much detail as possible of the film you just viewed. How does the dominant rhetorical position—the subject it’s addressing—appropriate for the subject? Can you imagine another way of filming this subject? Explain. [HJ6]

Persuasive forms can also rely solely on the power of documentary images themselves. Frederick Wiseman’s *Titicut Follies* (1967), for example, exposes the treatment of and influences attitudes about the criminally insane without any overt argumentation [Figure 7.24]. With such movies, what we are being persuaded to do or think may not be immediately

evident, yet it is usually obvious that we are engaged in a rhetorical argument that involves visual facts, intellectual statements, and sometimes emotional manipulation.

Reflexive and Performative Positions

Reflexive and performative positions call attention to the filmmaking process or perspective of the filmmaker in determining or shaping the documentary material being presented. Often this means calling attention to the making of the documentary or the process of watching a film itself. Certain films, like Laleen Jayamanne's *A Song of Ceylon* (1985), which references the classical documentary *Song of Ceylon* (1934) through its meditation on colonialism and gender in Sri Lanka, aim to remind viewers that documentary reality and history are always mediated by the film image, and that documentary films do not necessarily offer an easy access to truth. This focus can shift from the filmmaking process to the filmmaker, thus emphasizing the participation of that individual as a kind of performer of reality.

7.24 *Titicut Follies* (1967). Much of the film's power resides in shocking images of the institutional abuses of the prisoners. Bridgewater Film Company, Inc., permission granted by Zipporah Films, Inc.

7.25 *Sherman's March* (1986). A personal documentary about the filmmaker's attempt to make a historical film that becomes a reflexive performance about love, women, and making movies.

A classic example of a reflexive and performative documentary, Orson Welles's *F for Fake* (1973) wittily mediates on powers of illusion that bind filmmaking, the illusions of magicians, fraud, and art forgery. In Ross McElwee's *Sherman's March* (1986), the filmmaker sets out on a journey to document the famous Civil War general's conquest of the South; along the way, however, this witty film becomes more about the filmmaker's own

failed attempts to start or maintain a romantic relationship with the many women he meets [Figure 7.25].

Making Sense of Documentary Films

Although moviegoers have always been attracted to a film's entertainment value, audiences have also appreciated the cultural and educational values of nonfiction movies produced as early as the 1890s. These films presented sporting events, political speeches, and dramatic presentations of Shakespeare. In 1896, for instance, the Lumière brothers took audiences on an educational railway trip with the "phantom ride" of *Leaving Jerusalem by Railway* [Figure 7.26]. According to these practices, then, the documentary could presumably offer unmediated truths or factual insights that were unavailable through strictly narrative experiences. Regardless of how this basic view of the documentary may have changed since then, presenting presumed social, historical, or cultural truths or facts remains the foundation on which documentary films are built.

7.26 *Leaving Jerusalem by Railway* (1896). Early film allowed audiences to experience the pleasure and education of visiting new lands and vistas.

Perhaps more than narrative cinema, documentary films expand and complicate how we understand the world. The relationship between documentary films and the cultural and historical expectations of viewers thus plays a large part in how these movies are understood. Luis Buñuel's *Land Without Bread* (1933) might seem to be a kind of travelogue about a remote region of Spain — Las Hurdes — but its biting ironic soundtrack commentary, which flatly understates the brutal misery, poverty, and degradation in the region, makes the film a searing political commentary on the failure of the state and church to care adequately

for the people who live there. So unmistakable was the message of this film, in fact, that the Spanish government repressed it. Without its cultural context, this film might seem odd or confusing to some viewers today, reminding us that in order to locate the significance of a film, we often must understand the historical, social, and cultural context in which it was made.

VIEWING CUE

What makes a documentary film you have recently seen meaningful? How specifically does it achieve its aims and make its values apparent?

Throughout the history of documentaries, viewers have found these films most significant in their ability to reveal new or ignored realities not typically seen in narrative films, and to confront assumptions and alter opinions.

Revealing New or Ignored Realities

Because narrative movies dominate the cinematic scene, documentary films commonly have a differential value: successful documentary films offer different kinds of truth from narrative movies. Often this means revealing new or ignored realities by showing people, events, or levels of reality we have not seen before, because they have been excluded either from our social experience or from our experiences of narrative films. To achieve these kinds of fresh insight, documentaries often question the basic terms of narratives — such as the centrality of characters, the importance of a cause-and-effect chronology, or the necessity of a narrative point of view — or they draw on perspectives or techniques that would seem out of place in a narrative movie.

By showing us an object or a place from angles and points of view beyond the realistic range of human vision, such films place us closer to a newly discovered reality: we see the

bottom of a deep ocean through the power of an underwater camera or the flight of migrating birds from their perspectives in the skies. Perhaps the object will be presented for an inordinately long amount of time, showing minute changes rarely seen in our usual experiences: one movie condenses the gestation of a child in the womb, while another shows the dread and boredom experienced over one long night by a homeless person in Miami. David and Albert Maysles's *Grey Gardens* (1975) portrays the quirky extremes of a mother and daughter, relatives of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, living in a dilapidated mansion in East Hampton, Long Island. Slowly, by following their daily routines and dwelling on the incidentals in their lives, the film develops our capacity truly to see two individuals whose unique personalities and habits become less and less strange [Figure 7.27].

7.27 *Grey Gardens* (1975). The relationship between two quirky and unusual women becomes a touching and entertaining documentary about individualism and humanity.

Confronting Assumptions, Altering Opinions

Documentary films may present a familiar or well-known subject and attempt to make us comprehend it in a new way. Some documentaries are openly polemical when presenting a subject: as an obvious example, documentaries about a political figure or a controversial event may confront viewers' assumptions or attempt to alter received opinions about the person or event. Other films may ask us to rethink a moment in history or our feelings about what once seemed like a simple exercise, as in *Wordplay* (2006), a documentary about crossword puzzles and how they inspire intellectual activity [Figure 7.28].

With any and all of the formal and organizational tools available to a documentary, these films attempt to persuade viewers of certain facts, attack other points of view, argue with other films, or motivate viewers to act on social problems or concerns. An especially explicit example, Michael Moore's *Sicko* (2007) very visibly and tendentiously argues that the health

care system in the United States is antiquated and destructive, and that it needs to be changed. Released the same year, the documentary *Manufacturing Dissent: Uncovering Michael Moore* (2007) takes Moore and his many films to task for fudging or misrepresenting facts. Such polemic is central to this tradition of documentary cinema, which is always about which reality we wish to accept.^[HJ7]

7.28 *Wordplay* (2006). This documentary presents viewers with new perspectives, such as that of Merl Reagle, longtime crossword constructor, on the seemingly ordinary subject of crossword puzzles.

Serving as a Social, Cultural, and Personal Lens

From the two primary agendas discussed above come two traditions of documentary cinema: the social documentary and the ethnographic film. These two traditions encompass some of the main frameworks for understanding many documentary films throughout the twentieth century.

The Social Documentary

Social documentaries examine and present both familiar and unfamiliar peoples and cultures as social activities. Using a variety of organizational practices, this tradition emphasizes one or both of the following goals: authenticity in representing how people live and interact, and discovery in representing unknown environments and cultures. Considered by some scholars and filmmakers as the father of documentary, John Grierson made his first film, *Drifters* (1929), about North Sea herring fishermen; another early British filmmaker, Humphrey Jennings, continued this tradition with *Listen to Britain* (1942), a twenty-minute panorama of British society at war — from soldiers in the fields to women in factories. Indeed, the social documentary tradition is long and varied, stretching from Pare Lorentz's *The River* (1937),

made for the U.S. Department of Agriculture about the importance of the Mississippi River, to *Waste Land* (2010), about artist Vik Muniz's encounter with a community who live in and off the world's largest landfill on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Two important spin-offs from the social documentary tradition are the political documentary and the historical documentary.

The Political Documentary. Partially as a result of the social crisis of the Great Depression in the United States and the more general economic crises that occurred in most other countries after World War I, political documentaries aimed to investigate and to celebrate the political activities of men and women as they appear within the struggles of small and large social spheres. Contrasting themselves with the lavish Hollywood films of the times, these documentary films sought a balance of aesthetic objectivity and political purpose. Preceded by the films of Dziga Vertov and the Soviet cinema of the 1920s (such as *Man with a Movie Camera*), political documentaries tend to take analytical or persuasive positions, hoping to provoke or move viewers with the will to reform social systems. Narrated by Ernest Hemingway, Joris Ivens's *The Spanish Earth* (1937) presents, for example, the heroic resistance of the "Loyalists" as they fight valiantly against the brutal forces of a fascist government [Figure 7.32]. While political documentaries such as these can sometimes be labeled propaganda films because of their visible efforts to support a particular social or political issue or group, they frequently use more complex arguments and more subtle tactics than bluntly manipulative documentaries.

<BOX>

157010

FILM IN FOCUS

~~157010~~

Stories We Tell (2012)

See also: *Daughter Rite* (1980); *Capturing the Friedmans* (2003); *Bright Leaves* (2003)

FILM IN FOCUS



bedfordstmartins.com/filmexperience

To watch a clip from *Stories We Tell*, see the *Film Experience* LaunchPad.

Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2012) is an emotionally and intellectually complex example of the creative organizational and rhetorical possibilities that have made contemporary documentaries so exciting and often surprising. Years earlier Polley had established an active acting career and had also directed two powerful feature films, *Away from Her* (2006) and *Take This Waltz* (2011), both subtle and sensitive depictions of the difficult dynamics of adult relationships. Aligned with the traditions of the personal documentary and the essay film, *Stories We Tell* documents and explores her own family history, as Polley questions other family members, views old home movies, and investigates newspapers and other documents to determine if she is in fact her father's biological child.

In one sense, the film deftly employs all three major documentary expositional strategies. The early part of the film introduces various brothers and sisters — Mark, John, Joanna, Susy — as well as other relations and friends of her mother, as “talking head” figures who

comment on the life of Diane Polley, their experiences with this dynamic woman, and her early death from cancer. Woven within this accumulation of commentaries and remembrances is a series of old photographs and home-movie sequences of Diane frolicking around the house, playing at the beach, and at one point singing “Ain’t Misbehavin’” on an audition tape. Gradually this oblique portrait begins to reveal various contrasts and differences in Diane’s personality that suggest an increasingly complex history of a woman, who for all of her extroversion and exuberance carried secrets. Indeed, the central secret that the film uncovers is the nature and source of a pregnancy that produced Sarah herself.

The accumulation of those different perspectives slowly opens up this secret as a specific question about Sarah’s true biological father. Sarah, who is a visibly and audibly prominent presence throughout the film, pursues the mysteries of her parents’ relationship and her own birth as a developmental process that moves closer and closer to answers, while refocusing the accumulation of perspectives and commentaries that gradually concentrates on contrasting three possible fathers: Michael, the father whom she knows and loves despite some professed difficulties with the marriage; Geoffrey Bowes, an actor in the Montreal production where Diane worked decades earlier; and Harry Gulkin, a well-known film producer also present in Montreal at the time. These contrasting father figures become a version of the larger and more philosophical contrasts that organize this documentary among the different “stories we tell” about our experiences and lives.

The title of the film indicates a focus on various individual tales about the mother, and the expositional organization accumulates, contrasts, and develops through these little narratives. The “stories” of the title have been shaded and shaped by the limits and prejudices of memory; ultimately they demonstrate how no over-arching narrative can fully explain the mother’s character, personality, and history. One of the possible fathers, Harry Gulkin, claims, toward the conclusion of the film, that only two people have the “right” to tell the

story of Diane's affair since only she and he were there [Figure 7.29]. Otherwise, he says, "you can't ever touch bottom." Indeed, for Polley, that elusive "bottom" of any experience or personality can never actually be touched or documented, which is perhaps the fundamental truth of this film.

7.29 *Stories We Tell* (2012). Polley's biological father, Harry Gulkin, contends it is his history to tell, not Sarah's, since he was Diane's lover and so has a prior claim to truth.

Early on, Sarah Polley describes the interviews that organize the film as part of an "interrogation process," the primary rhetorical position of the film. Yet, just as it complicates the truth of its talking-head interviews and anecdotes, *Stories We Tell* twists that rhetorical position in contemporary ways. It reflexively engages and undermines the narrative interrogations that support most memories and, at the same time, calls attention to its own work as a personal film that uses theatrical reenactments to create its different perspectives on an elusive history.

At different points in the film, Michael reads narration which, we later learn, he was inspired to write because of the film's climactic revelation and because of his subsequently renewed bond with Sarah [Figure 7.30]. As he moves in and out of his own narrative, he appears sometimes as part of a third-person perspective on his history, while at other times he expresses himself through a first-person testimony about his experiences with Diane. Throughout this theatricalized narration, Sarah regularly interrupts Michael to have him reread lines ("take that line back") and so calls attention to the constructive fabric of narration itself, set within her fragmented documentary interrogation. As a related strategy, past events in the film are often retrieved through what seems to be authentic found footage and home movies, but at the conclusion of the film, many of these events and film clips are revealed as reenactments with scenes reconstructed and actors playing the roles of the main characters.

Like the deconstruction of Michael's narrative, these reenactments make what at first seem like the traditional facts and actualities of documentary form into a representational dramatization which may or may not be a fully accurate portrayal of those facts [Figure 7.31].

7.30 *Stories We Tell* (2012). In Sarah Polley's inventive documentary, her father Michael tells his version of the past as a performative reading.

7.31 *Stories We Tell* (2012). Old home movies — some real, some fabricated — offer glimpses of the mother, Diane, who may also be part fiction within this documentary.

Whereas the many stories and personal testimonies about Diane seem to make her the heart of the film, the reflexive frame and the use of reenactments gradually and somewhat surprisingly reposition the film's perspective and meaning, so that what actually happened in Diane's history may not be the most important truth for this documentary. When, near the conclusion, Sarah reveals to Michael that he is in fact not her biological father, she hugs him in a way that, according to him, "made the revelation worth it," so that for both him and Sarah, the search through Diane's past and the truth it revealed "doesn't make any difference." More than a poignant documentary about a mother whom no one will ever completely know, *Stories We Tell* is also a documentary about the love and loyalty of a daughter for the father in her life.

<END BOX>

Since World War II, political documentaries have grown more varied and occasionally more militant. In 1968, Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino produced *The Hour of the Furnaces*, a three-hour-long examination of the colonial

exploitation of Argentina's culture and resources that inspired heated political discussions and even demonstrations in the street. In recent decades, feminist documentaries, gay and lesbian documentaries, and documentaries about race explored political issues and identities that have traditionally not been addressed. The variety of these films indicates the power and purpose of this tradition. *American Revolutionary: The Evolution of Grace Lee Boggs* (2013) examines the life and work of a Detroit activist who continues, at age ninety-seven, to work for social change at a grassroots level. Robert Epstein and Richard Schmiechen's *The Times of Harvey Milk* (1984) describes the assassinations of the San Francisco mayor and of Milk, an activist who was the first gay supervisor elected in the city, and Jennie Livingston's *Paris Is Burning* (1991) documents the Harlem drag ball scene [Figure 7.33]. Spike Lee's HBO documentary *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006), about the government mishandling of the Hurricane Katrina disaster, is a worthy heir to a long tradition of documentaries that make the politics of race the centerpiece of the politics of the nation [Figure 7.34].

7.32 *The Spanish Earth* (1937). A celebration of the heroic resistance of fighters in Spain against an emerging fascist political machine. Courtesy Everett Collection

7.33 *Paris Is Burning* (1990). A sympathetic and witty portrayal of the subculture of drag balls in New York City.

7.34 *When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts* (2006). Spike Lee's HBO documentary uses the medium as a powerful tool for political statements.

The Historical Documentary. Another form related to social documentary is the historical documentary, a type of film that concentrates largely on recovering and representing events or figures in history. Depending on the topic, these films are often compilations of materials,

relying on old film footage or other materials such as letters, testimonials by historians, or photographs. Whatever the materials and tactics, however, historical documentaries have moved in two broad directions.

Conventional documentary histories assume the facts and realities of a past history can be more or less recovered and accurately represented. *Atomic Cafe* (1982), though a rather satirical documentary, uses media and government footage to describe the paranoia and hysteria of the nuclear arms race during the Cold War [Figure 7.35]. The films of Ken Burns, including the PBS series *The Civil War* (1990), *Baseball* (1996), and *The War* (2007), use a range of materials, techniques, and voices to re-create the layered dynamics of major historical and cultural events.

7.35 *Atomic Cafe* (1982). By employing archival footage and conventional documentary devices, this film satirizes the paranoia of 1950s culture.

7.36 *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987). This film documents a local hate crime that resonates in larger historical terms; at the same time, it reflects on the difficulty of communicating the full historical truth. Courtesy of Filmmakers Library

Reflexive documentary histories, in contrast, adopt a dual point of view: alongside the work to describe an event (for instance, one associated with a historical trauma such as the Holocaust or the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima) is the awareness that film or other discourses and materials will never be able to fully retrieve the reality of that lost history. Despite their vastly different topics (the Nazi death camps and the racist murder of a Chinese American automotive engineer), Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) and Christine Choy and Renee Tajima's *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987) engage specific historical and cultural atrocities and simultaneously reflect on the extreme difficulty, if not impossibility, of fully and accurately documenting the truth of those events and experiences [Figure 7.36].

Ethnographic Cinema

Ethnographic documentaries, with roots in early cinema, are a second major tradition in documentary film. While social documentaries tend to emphasize the political and historical significance of certain events and figures, ethnographic films are typically about cultural revelations, aimed at presenting specific peoples, rituals, or communities that may have been marginalized by or invisible to the mainstream culture. Here we will highlight two practices within the ethnographic tradition: anthropological films and cinéma vérité.

~~VIEWING CUE~~

~~Identify a documentary film you've seen that can be considered a social documentary. What type of social documentary is it? Explain.~~

Anthropological Films. Anthropological films explore different global cultures and peoples, both living and extinct. In the first part of the twentieth century, these films often sought out exotic and endangered communities to reveal them to viewers who had little or no experience of them. Such documentaries generally aim to reveal cultures and peoples authentically, without imposing the filmmaker's interpretations, but in fact they are often implicitly shaped by the perspectives of their makers. In the 1940s and 1950s, such works as Jean Rouch's *The Magicians of Wanzerbe* (1949) transformed film into an extension of anthropology, searching out the social rituals and cultural habits that distinguish the people of particular, often primitive, societies. Robert Gardner's *Dead Birds* (1965) examines the war rituals of the Dani tribe in New Guinea, maintaining a scientific distance that draws out what is most unique and different about the people [Figure 7.37].

7.37 *Dead Birds* (1965). This remarkable ethnographic film provides audiences with a glimpse of life in the Dani tribe in New Guinea, focusing on Weyak, a farmer and warrior, and Pua, a young swineherd. Courtesy of DER

The scope and subject matter of ethnographic documentaries have expanded considerably over the years, sometimes finding lost cultures in the West's own backyard. This contemporary revision of anthropological cinema investigates the rituals, values, and social patterns of families or subcultures, such as the skateboard clan of *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (2001), rather than directing its attention to cultures or communities that are "foreign" to its producers. Using found footage or archival prints of home movies made before 1950, Karen Shopsowitz's *My Father's Camera* (2001) argues that reality is sometimes best revealed by amateur filmmakers capturing everyday life through home movies and snapshots. One of the most ambitious films in movie history, Chris Marker's *Sans soleil/Sunless* (1983) shuffles and experiments with many of the structures and tropes of ethnographic documentaries as it follows a cameraman's letters as he who travels the world between Japan and Africa or, as the film puts it, between "the two extreme poles of survival."

NEW BOX

<BOX> History Close-Up: Indigenous Media^[HJ8]

Like the Kayapo and Waipai Indians (see p. xxx), the indigenous people of Canada also left behind their legacy as objects of ethnographic film and campaigned for self-representation. Organized activism resulted in the licensing of the Inuit Broadcasting Network in 1982, featuring programming by, for, and about native Canadians. Years later, a new phase of indigenous media making was marked by the historic release of *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)*; 2001). Shot in digital video, this extraordinary film, directed by Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk, appropriately enough deploys the genre of epic to explore a

people's past [Figure 8.]. But it portrays a cultural legend, not a factual past. Although at first it resembles an ethnographic film, *Atanarjuat* is set a millennium ago. By setting its depiction of the traditional way of life in the mythic past, the film represents an Inuit claim to self-representation on several levels. The film's use of amateur actors lends an "authenticity" to the scripted scenes, and its script represents the longest text ever written in the Inuit language. Its images also implicitly acknowledge and respond to the beauty as well as the problems of a film like *Nanook of the North*. Two subsequent films made in 2006 and 2009 complete the *Fast Runner* trilogy.

8. *Atanarjuat* (2001). Shot on digital video in the Canadian Arctic, this epic is the first feature made in the Inuktitut language by Inuit filmmakers.

<END BOX>

Indigenous Media

—The history of indigenous media is concerned with the self-representation of native cultures, and their ability to assert power through the control of the image. Film can record rituals in a way that written ethnographies cannot. Filming interviews minimizes the mediation of an interpreter by capturing the subject's own words and gestures through the lens. However, the camera can never grant complete access to a cultural context. In a culture that does not use cameras, the equipment can hardly be invisible or neutral. But because it can capture conversations and gestures, sounds and settings, time and space, film can give a strong impression of documenting a culture despite such mediations. Widely considered the first feature-length documentary film and certainly one of the most influential movies ever made, Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) is a record of the lives and customs of

the Inuit people of the Canadian Arctic; shortly after Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper made *Grass* (1925), a record of an Iranian migration (and later, in 1933 made the not-unrelated feature film *King Kong*)

Nowhere do claims of film as an impartial record become more loaded than in the filming of indigenous people by outside observers, and not until recently have indigenous groups been able to appropriate video and film technology to tell their own stories. Deploying a technology like the movies in such a cultural encounter means claiming the power to represent others and their history. The camera conveys a profound feeling of presence that also puts the viewer in the place of the observer or "expert."

The recent introduction of video technology to indigenous people, such as the Kayapo and Waipai Indians in the Amazon Basin of Brazil, has resulted in considerable output that has several empowering uses [Figure 8.]. These include the preservation of traditional culture for future generations; video activism for land rights and the environment; and a new form of visual expression in a culture that has always relied on pictorial communication. While the Kayapo are entering a new historical moment by employing this technology, the video work's primary purpose is to preserve the past.

8. *The Spirit of TV* (1990). Amazon Indians, such as the Waipai, have used video to record their culture and assert their rights.

The indigenous people of Canada also left behind their legacy as objects of ethnographic film and campaigned for self-representation. Organized activism resulted in the licensing of the Inuit Broadcasting Network in 1982, featuring programming by, for, and about native Canadians. A new phase of indigenous media-making was marked by the historic release of *Atanarjuat (The Fast Runner)* (2001). Shot in digital video, this extraordinary film, directed by Inuit filmmaker Zacharias Kunuk, appropriately enough deploys the genre of epic to explore a people's past [Figure 8.]. But it portrays a cultural legend, not a factual past.

Although at first it resembles an ethnographic film, *Atanarjuat* is set a millennium ago. By setting its depiction of the traditional way of life in the mythic past, the film represents an Inuit claim to self-representation on several levels. The film's use of amateur actors lends an "authenticity" to the scripted scenes, and its script represents the longest text ever written in the Inuit language. Its images also implicitly acknowledge and respond to the beauty as well as the problems of a film like *Nanook of the North*. Two subsequent films made in 2006 and 2009 complete the *Fast Runner* trilogy.

8. *Atanarjuat* (2001). Shot on digital video in the Canadian Arctic, this epic is the first feature made in the Inuktitut language by Inuit filmmakers.

Cinéma Vérité and Direct Cinema. One of the most important and influential documentary schools related to ethnographic cinema is cinéma vérité, French for "cinema truth." Related to Dziga Vertov's *Kino-Pravda* ("cinema truth") of the 1920s, cinéma vérité insists on filming real objects, people, and events in a confrontational way, so that the reality of the subject continually acknowledges the reality of the camera recording it. This film movement arose in the late 1950s and 1960s in Canada and France before quickly spreading to film cultures in the United States and other parts of the world.

Aided by the development of lightweight cameras and portable sound equipment, filmmakers like Jean Rouch created in their images a jerky immediacy to suggest the filmmakers' participation and absorption in the events they were recording. Rouch's *Moi un noir/I, a Negro* (1958), filmed in Treichville, a neighborhood in Ivory Coast's capital city, portrays the everyday life of a group of young Africans accompanied by the voiceover narration of one who refers to himself as Edward G. Robinson (after the "tough guy" actor in American films of the 1930s). In this version of cinéma vérité, rules of continuity and

character development are willfully ignored. Here reality is not just what objectively appears; reality is also the fictions and fantasies that these individuals create for and about themselves and the acknowledged involvement of the filmmaker as interlocutor. Moreover, unlike its American counterpart, French cinéma vérité draws particular attention to the subjective perspective of the camera's rhetorical position: in Rouch's film, the voiceover frequently makes ironic remarks about what is being shown.

The North American version of cinéma vérité, referred to as *direct cinema*, is more observational and less confrontational than the French practice. Its landmark film, *Primary*, follows Democratic candidates John F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey through the Wisconsin state presidential primary. D. A. Pennebaker and the Maysles brothers, who were all involved in the making of *Primary*, continued to work in this tradition, gravitating toward social topics in which the identity of the subjects is inseparable from their role as performers. Pennebaker made numerous cinéma vérité-like films such as *Dont Look Back* (1967) [Figure 7.38], a portrait of the young Bob Dylan, and *The War Room* (1993), about the 1992 political campaign of Bill Clinton. In addition to *Grey Gardens*, Albert and David Maysles made many films in direct cinema style, including *Salesman* (1968), about itinerant Bible salesmen, and *Gimme Shelter* (1970), a powerful and troubling record of the 1969 Rolling Stones tour across the United States. Albert Maysles continues to be active, serving as an adviser to new generations of documentarians.

7.38 *Dont Look Back* (1967). Direct cinema contemplates the inside of the celebrity world of Bob Dylan.

Indigenous Cinema. Indigenous cinema involves direct -representation of native cultures, and their ability to assert power through the control of the image. Film can record rituals in a

way that written ethnographies cannot. Cameras can never grant complete access to a cultural context, especially in a culture that does not use a camera, where equipment can hardly remain invisible or neutral, even when filming interviews that capture the subject's own words and gestures. But this ability to capture conversations, gestures, sounds, settings, time, and space, film can give a strong impression of documenting a culture despite such mediations. Widely considered the first feature-length documentary film and certainly one of the most influential movies ever made, Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) is a record of the lives and customs of the Inuit people of the Canadian Arctic; shortly after Ernest B. Schoedsack and Merian C. Cooper made *Grass* (1925), a record of an Iranian migration (and later, in 1933 made the not unrelated feature film *King Kong*).

Nowhere do claims of film as an impartial record become more loaded than in the filming of indigenous people by outside observers, and not until recently have indigenous groups been able to appropriate video and film technology to tell their own stories. Deploying a technology like the movies in such a cultural encounter means claiming the power to represent others and their history. The camera conveys a profound feeling of presence that also puts the viewer in the place of the observer or "expert."

The recent introduction of video technology to indigenous people, such as the Kayapo and Waipai Indians in the Amazon Basin of Brazil, has resulted in considerable output that has several empowering uses [Figure 8.]. These include the preservation of traditional culture for future generations; video activism for land rights and the environment; and a new form of visual expression in a culture that has always relied on pictorial communication. While the Kayapo are entering a new historical moment by employing this technology, the video work's primary purpose is to preserve the past.

8. *The Spirit of TV* (1990). Amazon Indians, such as the Waipai, have used video to record their culture and assert their rights.

Personal Documentaries, Reenactments, and Mockumentaries

Three specific strategies or tendencies have come to the foreground in recent years to define contemporary traditions in documentaries. As the line between social documentaries and ethnographic films has wavered, and, as mentioned, filmmaking equipment becomes more widely available, **personal** or **subjective documentaries** that look more like autobiographies or diaries have become more common. This subgenre has roots in earlier films: In *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976), Jonas Mekas portrays his fears and hopes in a diary film about his growing up as an immigrant in New York; counterpointing home movies, journal entries, and a fragmented style that resembles a diary, the rhythmic interjections of the commentator-poet express feelings ranging from angst to delight. In *A Healthy Baby Girl* (1996), filmmaker Judith Helfland explores the causes of her cancer diagnosis in her mother's use during pregnancy of the drug DES (diethylstilbestrol), which was prescribed to prevent miscarriage. While the film exposes and indicts this breach of medical ethics and its impact on women's health, its primary focus is on the personal journey of the filmmaker and her family [Figure 7.39].

7.39 *A Healthy Baby Girl* (1996). Some documentaries, such as this one about the filmmaker and her mother, entwine a personal story with larger issues, here a breach of medical ethics. Courtesy Women Make Movies

Questions about the truth and honesty of documentaries have shadowed this practice since Flaherty's reconstruction of "typical" events for the camera in *Nanook of the North* and his other films in the 1920s. Recently more and more documentaries have seized on the question of the veracity of the camera in order to complicate or to spoof documentary practices.

Increasingly visible and debated today, documentary **reenactments** use documentary techniques in order to present a reenactment or theatrical staging of presumably true or real events. An early example of this blurring of boundaries, *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) depicts the Algerian revolt against the French occupation (1954–1962) as a re-creation, a film about a real historical event that uses documentary techniques while developing the story with a script and actors (some playing themselves). Indeed, an opening caption boasts that no documentary footage is used in the film.

Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) is a documentary about Randall Adams, a man convicted of killing a Dallas police officer in 1976, but it also becomes a mystery drama about discovering the real murderer. While it uses the many expository techniques of documentary film such as close-ups of evidence and talking-head interviews, *The Thin Blue Line* alternates these with staged reenactments of the murder evening, invented dialogue, an eerie Philip Glass soundtrack, courtroom drawings, and even clips from old movies [Figure 7.40]. The debates and questions surrounding the practice of reenactment are explored in *Manufacturing Dissent*, Rick Caine and Debbie Melnyk's documentary on Michael Moore's use of reenactments in his films.

7.40 *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). Reenacting a crime as a part of a documentary investigation, Errol Morris's film set the stage for more experimental documentary formats.

At the other end of the spectrum, **mockumentaries** take a much more humorous approach to the question of truth and fact by using a documentary style and structure to present and stage fictional (sometimes ludicrous) realities. The mockumentary is an extreme example of how documentaries can generate different experiences and responses depending on viewing context and one's knowledge of the traditions and aims of such films. For example, with the initial release of *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984), some viewers saw and understood it as a

straightforward rock-music documentary (or “rockumentary”), while most recognized it as a spoof on that documentary tradition. The two responses dramatize how people’s different ideas of, knowledge about, and associations with documentaries can elicit very different interpretations of the “reality” of the film [Figure 7.41]. The popular and controversial *Borat* (2006) integrates a similar mockumentary style by following a fictional Kazakh television talking head as he travels “the greatest country in the world” in search of celebrities, cowboys, and the “cultural learning” found on the streets of America. Actor Sacha Baron Cohen mixes his impersonation of the character Borat with interviews of people who accept his persona as genuine. As such, the film raises questions about the boundary between a parody of viewers’ assumptions about the truth and a dangerous distortion of the integrity of documentary values [Figure 7.42].

7.41 *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984). Mockumentaries like this cult film remind us that the authenticity of cinematic documentaries relies on the experiences and expectations of their audiences.

Closely related to the mockumentary but with more serious aims is the fake documentary, a tradition that extends from Buñuel’s *Land Without Bread* through Orson Welles’s *F for Fake*, a movie that looks at real charlatans and forgers while itself questioning the possibilities of documentary truth. A more recent film, Cheryl Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* (1996), is a fictional account of an African American lesbian documentary filmmaker researching a black actress from the 1930s. The archive of photos and film footage she assembles for the fake documentary within the film represents a lovingly fabricated work by the film’s creative team — an imagining of a history that has not survived [Figure 7.43].

7.42 *Borat* (2006). Some of the most important assumptions about documentary integrity are violated in this film, perhaps as a way to satirize the pretensions of those assumptions.

As we have seen, documentary films create movie experiences markedly different from those of narrative cinema. While some of these experiences are non-narrative portraits that envision individuals in ways quite unlike the narrative histories of the same people, others are about the truth of events. Narrative movies encourage us to enjoy, imagine, and think about our temporal and historical relationships with the world and to consider when those plots and narratives seem adequate according to our experiences. Documentary movies remind us, however, that we have many other kinds of relationships with the world that involve us in many other insightful ways — through debate, through exploration, and through analysis.

VIEWING CUE

Consider a documentary you recently viewed. What were its aims and assumptions? How might seeing this documentary in a different historical or cultural context distort or change those aims and assumptions?

7.43 *The Watermelon Woman* (1996). As a serious use of a mockumentary tradition, this film suggests a history that has not survived — or perhaps not yet arrived.

<BOX>

FORM IN ACTION

The Contemporary

Documentary: *What Happened, Miss*

Simone? Exit Through the Gift Shop

([HJ9]20152010)

While contemporary documentaries engage a wide variety of subjects and topics, from politics and war to the natural environment and science, one of the most popular has been musical events and musicians some of the most popular have involved musicians and music events. Since the coming of sound in 1927 through landmark documentaries like *Don't Look Now* (1967), about Bob Dylan's first tour of England, and *Searching for Sugar Man* (2012), about the lost rock icon Rodriguez of the 1970s, music docs have proliferated through their own tactics and conventions.

The recent *What Happened, Miss Simone?* is a dexterous and incisive example, telling the complex story of the extraordinary musician and performer Nina Simone through a series of layers and connections common to the best of these types of documentaries. With different musical performances as the connecting fabric throughout the film, it presents a retrospective development of Simone's life and career from childhood to adulthood, along the way including voice-over commentaries from friends, family members, music professionals, and other celebrities [Figure 8.X]. Often using archival footage, the performances themselves create a moving collage through her career of small club engagements, large theatrical events,

and a variety of television appearances, in each case capturing her singular exuberance and energy. [Figure 8.X]

A distinctive movetechnique of this music documentary is, however, how the film weaves the abuse she suffered into the passion and poignancy of her singing, so that the music becomes, in her words, a measure of and outlet for her rage and anger about the mistreatmentsabuse in her personal life. [Figure] Even more distinguishing perhapsPerhaps even more disturbing is how her remarkable musical abilities turn into political activism. At one point, she ask pointedly: "How can you be an artist and not reflect the times?" "aThis - phrase thatquestion leads into one of the most extraordinary sequences in the film: the performance of "Mississippi Goddam" [Figure 8.X], her song about racist violence, inter-cut with archival footage of racial violence against African Americans during the Civil Rights protests [Figure 8.X[10]].

~~Contemporary documentaries often appear especially conscious of the styles and forms that have preceeded them; they experiment with old and new tactics, such as emphasizing personal perspectives or exploring reenactments. Not surprisingly, mockumentaries, which self-consciously parody the common styles and strategies of traditional documentaries, have become increasingly popular.~~

~~*Exit Through the Gift Shop* (2010) is a fascinating example of the contemporary documentary, largely because it is unclear what is being documented, what is authentic, and what or who it might be mocking. The film begins as the tale of Thierry Guetta, who decides to make a documentary about street artists, most notably the mysterious and famous Banksy.~~

Gradually, however, Banksy assumes control of the film, and it becomes about Guetta's sudden, bizarre rise as a celebrity street artist.

Early on, Guetta is seen as a cinéma vérité artist who captures the hidden world of street artists [Figure 7.44a]. However, when Guetta meets and joins forces with Banksy, the line between art and self-parody blurs. After documenting Banksy's success at his farcically famous art exhibit in Los Angeles [Figure 7.44b], Guetta wonders: If Banksy can triumphantly mock the values and truth of public life, then why can't I [Figure 7.44c]? With encouragement from Banksy, Guetta mounts his own extravagant opening of his newly discovered talents [Figure 7.44d]. In the end, the mysterious and hooded Banksy can only wonder at (and regret) the monster he has created [Figure 7.44e]. If street art represents a way to intervene in day-to-day realities of the world, what does it mean when those interventions begin to look like a commercial scam? And if that art appears as a scam, does a documentary about it—by Banksy—also mock itself?

7.44a

7.44b

7.44c

7.44d

7.44e

FORM IN ACTION



bedfordstmartins.com/filmexperience

To watch a video about *Exit Through the Gift Shop* *What Happened, Miss Simone?*, see the *Film Experience* LaunchPad.

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CONCEPTS AT WORK

As different as they are, *Grizzly Man*, *Man of Aran*, *Stories We Tell*, and the other documentaries discussed in this chapter provoke similar analytical and conceptual questions. All these films have developed their own strategies and formal features: from expositional organizations that contrast, accumulate, or develop facts and figures to rhetorical positions that work to explore, analyze, persuade, or even “perform” the world. *Grizzly Man* might be said to accumulate images of Treadwell through a perspective that at once performs and analyzes, while *Man of Aran* develops its explorative survey of life on the Aran Islands through images that span a day. What we often value about films like *Stories We Tell* is their ability to reveal that world to us in new ways and to provoke us to see it with fresh eyes, outcomes that have generated numerous and complex traditions from the many types of social documentaries to the many kinds of ethnographic films and personal documentaries. For the documentary film you are considering in class, reflect carefully and precisely on the following questions:

- Can the film be characterized as primarily nonfiction like the autobiographical *Stories We Tell*, or primarily non-narrative like *Grizzly Man*?
- How would you describe the organizational strategies of the film?
- Is there a clear rhetorical strategy for the film as in *Man of Aran*?
- How do you make sense of the values and traditions that inform the film? Does it aim primarily to alter opinions, to investigate a different cultural world, or, perhaps like *Grizzly Man*, to do both?

Activities

- Choose what you consider to be a very specific and very pressing contemporary social issue as the topic for a documentary you will make.

- Describe the presiding point of view that the film will use (its rhetorical position).
- Then sketch some of the central scenes or images you intend to use and explain their organization.
- Finally, explain the tradition that seems most to align with the themes, strategies, and aims of the film.